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18 August 1980

MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: Iran and the US Presidential Election

Iranian hardliners--especially Ayatollah Khomeini--are determined to exploit the hostage issue to bring about President Carter's defeat in the November elections. We expect the Iranians to expose past "US imperialism" in Iran as well as to emphasize US inability to free the hostages. Tehran wants the world to believe that Imam Khomeini caused President Carter's downfall and disgrace.

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Iranian leaders believe that the US elections offer them an opportunity to further humiliate the US in general and the President in particular. Khomeini has often said that President Carter is not really concerned about the hostages but simply wants to use the issue to ensure re-election. [] Khomeini is determined to be remembered as the man who brought down the Shah and the current administration in the US.

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There is no sign that the Iranians are concerned that, if elected, Governor Reagan would adopt a tougher approach to the hostage situation or, in fact, that Khomeini cares who the next President will be. Ayatollah Beheshti said in mid-July that Tehran does not want to deal with President Carter, Reagan "or any other one" except the American people on the hostages. The Iranians are confident that the US lacks the ability to rescue the hostages no matter who is President.

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Trials

The hardliners believe that show trials of the hostages offer the best way to humiliate the US. We expect at least some hostages will be tried before 4 November. The Iranians have claimed that they have discovered numerous documents in the Embassy that prove that some Embassy personnel are CIA employees who were in contact with opponents of Khomeini. We expect they will use these and hostages' "confessions" to prove their case against the US to the world.

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We expect the hardliners would dominate the trial procedure since they control the Iranian judicial system. To maximize the impact of the trials the Iranians could:

- Invite the press to observe the trials;
- Prolong the trials for weeks, perhaps trying each hostage individually;
- Invite US citizens to testify about past US activities in Iran such as the 1953 coup and CIA ties to SAVAK;
- Appoint notorious Iranian religious leaders like Ayatollah Khalkhali to serve in the jury; and
- Invite representatives from various liberation groups like the PLO to testify about US imperialism.

We expect the Iranians will find at least some hostages guilty of espionage and sentence them to long prison terms both to constrain the US from retaliating and to underline US impotence on the hostage issue. Hassan Ayat, a hardline ideologue in the Assembly, said this month that the hostages "must be put on trial, be condemned and serve sentences."

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Other Activities

The Iranians may also choose to encourage Iranian students in the US to step up their protests to further discredit President Carter during the campaign. While we

have no evidence of direct Iranian instigation of the recent student demonstrations, [redacted] the Iranian Interest Section is in contact with the students and eager to exploit their activities to whip up anti-American sentiment in Iran. [redacted]

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Any word of encouragement from Khomeini almost certainly would spark fresh student outbreaks in the US and other countries. Even without Tehran's encouragement, we expect Iranian students in the US and their Palestinian allies may want to influence the US elections by sparking violent confrontations with US citizens during demonstrations. We do not rule out the possibility as well that Iranian extremists both in the US and in Iran may resort to violence within the US to influence the elections. [redacted]

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Khomeini may also choose to stir up trouble among Shia Muslims in Saudi Arabia to pressure the US this fall. Tehran radio has long broadcast inflammatory appeals to the Shia--who are located near the Saudi's major oil facilities--with some success. [redacted]

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